

The Curse of Death

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Summary: Simba and his friends go in search of a hermit. But he's not in the best of moods...

Chapter 1: Chapter 1: The Hermit

AN: Greetings, everyone! Didn't expect to see me so soon, huh? Well, surprise! I was looking forward to writing this story, so I just sort of jumped right into it. And here it is. Aren't you lucky?

The Curse of Death

Chapter One: The Hermit

"My... name... is... *Nala*..."

Simba poked his head up from his spot by the river to see Nala stood over a terrified-looking cub. It looked as though she was trying her best to communicate with him. "Nala, what are you doing?"

Simba knew who the cub was. He was called Ugaidi, and had suffered horrible torture at the malicious paws of some ravenous creatures who were after a mystical being known as the Roho. They wanted its power for years, but due to their incredible lack of intelligence they were unable to get into the Dark Caves where it resided.

A cub called Aibu, however, had succeeded. He was once an ally of Simba, Nala and Haiba, but had taken a turn towards the dark side after his home—coincidentally, where Simba and the others lived now—was ravaged by the Scavengers. He wanted the power of the Roho to cleanse the world of 'imperfect life forms', but met his fate after being chewed alive by the creatures and swallowed up. He wouldn't be a nuisance to them ever again.

"I'm just trying to speak to him, Simba," Nala said, her eyes focused on Ugaidi, who was trembling in fear. He had been driven completely insane by the suffering the creatures had dished out on him. It felt like he was going to burst at any second. "Trying to get him back to normal, you know?"

"He *is* normal," Simba said, striding over to Nala's side and staring at the terrified Ugaidi. "It's just that the torture has made him go crazy. What he really needs is a good shock to snap him out of it—like with the hiccups."

"I could kiss him," Haiba suggested, surfacing unexpectedly from the river. "*That* would be a good shock." It seemed that he always popped up whenever the prospect of something romantic happening was going on...

"You're not kissing him, Haiba," Nala said. "He's insane enough already. So are you. I think what we need is to work with him. Over time we can talk to him and help him back to being his normal self. Build a relationship."

"And when did *you* become an expert on animal minds?" Haiba asked, staring at her incredulously as he clambered out of the water.

"I'm just trying to help him," she replied, glancing at Ugaidi with a sympathetic expression. "Just look at the poor little thing—he's terrified!"

"*Creatures*..." Ugaidi spoke for the first time in ages, rocking back and forth slowly. He looked utterly traumatised. "*Creatures*..."

"The creatures are gone," Nala stressed, staring into the cub's wide eyes. "*Gone*. Do. You. Understand?"

Ugaidi let out a high-pitched squeal and dove into a nearby bush, disappearing from sight. Clearly the death of the creatures hadn't exactly put him at ease. His mind had become far too distorted to understand that they were gone for ever. It was going to take a lot of work to get him back to normal...

"I hope you're not planning on *keeping* that insane cub," Zazu said, landing on the ground in front of Simba and Nala. "The current King and Queen you may be, but he could still be allied with whatever monsters are out there!"

"Since when did we become the King and Queen?" Nala asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Well, um... according to the laws of the Pride Lands, in the event of any disaster the remaining heirs to the kingdom will become the rightful rulers," Zazu explained, rather reluctantly. "So that makes you—sadly—the King and Queen of whoever's left of the pride. Namely, *us*."

"Cool," Simba said, shrugging. "Then that means we're *not* getting rid of Ugaidi. If we let him run wild in the jungle, there's no telling what he'd do. He might set the whole place on fire."

"He's running wild *in here*!" Zazu exclaimed, gesturing to Jowai Resort with a wing. "As your royal advisor, I suggest that

you either desert or kill this nuisance at once!"

"When did you become so mean, Zazu?" Nala asked. "You never used to be like this."

"I've learnt that there's no point in being polite any more," Zazu replied. He, of course, didn't tell them that his heart had been significantly hardened by the death of his one true love, Pori. It was something that he would never get over. Never. "Now, you should get rid of him because he's a danger to our chances of surviving out here in this horrible place."

"Just forget him," Simba said, walking away from Zazu. "We're not getting rid of him, and that's that. He needs help."

"But how?" Haiba asked, following him. "He won't answer us! He just keeps talking about 'the creatures' all of the time."

"You'll regret this!" Zazu called, flying after them. "That cub will be the death of us! I guarantee it! I—"

Bonk! Zazu crashed headfirst into a tree, silencing him as he collapsed unconscious to the ground.

"It's so much better when he's quiet," Nala said. "Now, about Ugaidi—"

"Look, I think I have an idea," Simba said, thinking back to their previous adventure. "You remember what the Roho said?"

"Yeah—something about a hermit," Haiba replied.

Since the Roho could present anyone with whatever their heart desires, Simba—naturally—had asked for the Pride Lands to be returned to normal. However, for some odd reason there seemed to be some kind of 'magical spell' preventing the kingdom from being tampered with. Whoever was behind this, the Roho could not say. He did say, though, that an old hermit on the opposite side of the jungle might be able to assist them in some way.

"Well, exactly," Simba said. "Ugaidi might know something about this hermit. Maybe it could jog his memory, too. Who knows? Anything is possible."

"You could try," Haiba said, "although I doubt you'll get much out of him. He's too scared that he's going to be digested. Personally, I'd prefer that over being covered in a river's worth of drool..." He grimaced at the thought of his disgusting encounter with the creatures.

"Let's just see," Nala sighed, walking over to the bush where Ugaidi was hiding. "Ugaidi, will you come out of there?"

"Creatures!" Ugaidi bellowed from inside, his voice muffled by the bush. "Coming to kill us all! Coming to destroy! To devour!" He screamed at the top of his voice, causing Simba and the others to cover their ears.

"Ugaidi, you need to *focus*," Nala said, hoping that he would listen to them. "Simba wants to ask you something important."

"Yeah," Simba said, stepping closer to the bush. "Ugaidi, do you know anything about a hermit?"

Ugaidi's head popped out of the bush. He stretched his neck out until his face was almost touching Simba's. "*Hermit?*"

"Uh, yeah," Simba said, slightly disturbed by how close Ugaidi was getting. "A hermit. Know anything about him?"

"The hermit..." Ugaidi tugged at the fur on his head, as if straining to remember about this mysterious hermit. "The hermit..."

"His mind is too damaged," Haiba said, deflated. "He won't know."

"The hermit!" Ugaidi yelled, his eyes suddenly flashing into life. "The Hermit of Hekima!"

"The Hermit of Hekima?" Haiba repeated. "Well, that just rolls off the tongue."

"The Hermit of Hekima!" Ugaidi exclaimed. "The wise one! The all-knowing master! No one is smarter than he!"

"Yeah, where do we find him?" Nala asked, happy that they were at least getting *somewhere*. "Somehow, just saying 'the other side of the jungle' isn't really helpful. Remind me never to trust mystical spirits ever again."

"The Hermit of Hekima resides at the edge of the Kuvunjwa River," Ugaidi said, eyes boggling at he explained this to them all. As if in a trance. "Far away from any other animals."

"The Kuvunjwa River," Haiba said, struggling to pronounce the name. "Okay. That *doesn't* roll off the tongue so much."

"But do you know where the river is, Haiba?" Nala asked, turning to him for assistance. "You must have heard of it *somewhere*. You know everything!"

"Aw..." Haiba said, blushing. "You're too kind."

"Just tell us!"

"Okay, okay," Haiba said, hitting himself on the head as if trying to whack the memories back into his brain. "I think I remember it—but we used to call it the *K* River. Much easier to say, you see."

"Uh-huh," Simba said, listening carefully. "So how do we find it? How far away is it from here?"

"Miles and miles," Haiba said. "To get to the K River, we'd have to travel for days on end. And that's if you were riding an elephant."

"But you'd know how to get there?" Nala asked.

Haiba shrugged. "I *guess*," he said. "But don't rely on me, will you? My geography of this jungle is a little rusty. My mother was the best at knowing where to go. Some of her skills didn't really rub off on me, though. Still..." He patted his cheek. "I have this lovely face—and that more than makes up for it."

Nala's expression turned flat. "Whatever you say, Haiba. Whatever you say."

"We have to get there," Simba said. "Otherwise we'll *never* know why the Pride Lands are protected by magic. The Hermit of Hekima is the only animal who might have the answers."

"Then I suggest we bring Ugaidi," Haiba said. "He knows more than he's letting on. Oh, and we should leave Zazu and your mother behind. Just in case they upset him any more than they have already."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Nala said. "I know Zazu's annoying, but my mother wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Wasn't she the pride's best hunter?" Haiba asked.

"Shut up," Nala snapped. "That's not the point."

"I'm only saying that Zazu's personality might rub off on her," Haiba said, shrugging. "You never know..." He smiled slightly. "They might end up together." Then he walked off.

"You're kidding, right?" Nala asked, walking after him. "Tell me you're kidding."

But Haiba didn't answer. He just kept smiling.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2: The Voice

Chapter Two: The Voice

Sarafina liked to have some time to herself. Just an hour or so in the jungle to be alone with her thoughts and relax. It was supposed to bring some peace into her seemingly neverending hectic life.

Of course, inevitably, her thoughts always led her to thinking about her husband.

Or, at least, who she *thought* was her husband. So many strange things had happened to Sarafina in her life. From being kidnapped by vampires and used in their scheme for immortality to having her second home destroyed in a fiery torrent of lava, every event seemed to become more confusing than the last.

But one thing—and the *worst* thing, she thought—was about her mate. Nala's father. She had always been under the impression that her mate was a lovely lion called Muerto. However, from what she could recall, the only memory she had of someone who went by that name was a childhood friend who once had strong feelings for her. It had been a long time since then, so she couldn't exactly remember whether she felt the same about *him*...

If there was one mystery Sarafina wanted to solve in her life, then it was that. Was her mate really a lion called Muerto? Somehow, she doubted it. It was clear that something very odd had happened to her in the past. Something horrible.

"Sarafina..."

Sarafina looked up from the quiet clearing upon hearing the voice. But all that was in front of her was a very large circular river. No one around at all. That was why she liked it. Spacious yet peaceful. The ideal place to have a quiet nap without anyone watching.

"Sarafina..." the voice hissed.

She looked around again, really straining her eyes to see whether there was any other animal around. But there was no one. The voice seemed to come out of thin air...

"Sarafina..."

"Who's there?" Sarafina demanded, wanting this joke to stop right here and now. Whoever was doing this was likely to get a sharp claw strike right across their face! "Show yourself!"

Again, no answer.

What is going on today? she wondered, bemused.

"Sarafina!"

Suddenly, her brain seemed to boil over with information. Memories flooded in and out of her mind: her dead parents, Muerto, the Family of Blood...

And a lion with an odd staff.

It was this lion who was stood in front of her right now.

"Hello, Sarafina," the lion said, smiling unpleasantly.

Sarafina almost fell back in surprise. Suddenly, the mass of memories seemed to drain out of her brain, and she forgot everything again. "Who... who are you?" She couldn't possibly imagine who this odd lion was.

"You don't remember me," said the lion, "but my name is Hago."

"Hago?" Sarafina said, narrowing her eyes and lowering her head. "I know that name... somewhere..."

"It's right there," Hago said. "At the back of your head. But you'll never remember. You *can't* remember. I've taken away that part of your mind. The part about *me*."

"What do you mean?" Sarafina asked, becoming increasingly angry with how mysterious this Hago—whoever he may be—was acting. "You can't just take away part of someone's mind."

"Oh, but I can, Sarafina," Hago said. "For a very special reason." He looked around, as a grin spread across his face.

"And you'll never know."

"Tell me now!" Sarafina screamed. "*Tell me the truth!*"

Hago just laughed. With a flash of his staff, he flung a green bolt of energy right into Sarafina's face. She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

And she wouldn't remember a thing.

"Okay, so we need to plan out this journey," Simba said, pacing back and forth, thinking fast. "As long as there's enough food and water to survive, we should be okay to go."

"Ah," Haiba said, raising a paw. "I think we might have to cross the desert to get there."

"The *desert*?" Simba exclaimed. "Oh, come on—that's not even a part of the jungle!"

"I think you'll find that it cuts right through the jungle," Haiba said. "You're forgetting: this is a big place. Much bigger than the Pride Lands, or... *any* kingdom, for that matter."

"But that desert is a nightmare," Nala groaned. "Remember that business with the mermaid? It got so hot we almost burned to death!"

"Hey, I almost had the water in my body sucked out," Simba reminded them. "I think that's a bit worse, don't you?"

"I thought it was a kinda hot death," Haiba said with a smile. "If there's one way to go, then I'd like it to be that. Death by kissing."

"You'll have death by my claws if you don't keep your mouth shut," Nala threatened.

"Look, just listen to me," Haiba said. "There isn't any other way to get across the desert. We just need to be quick and fast getting through there. It's only a few miles long, anyway. No trouble at all."

"That's not what you said last time," Nala said.

"But there's no outside danger this time, is there?" Haiba retorted. "It's just a straight stroll through the desert. Easy."

"We're going to *have* to go through the desert, then," Simba sighed, although he really wasn't fond of the idea. But there seemed to be no other option. "Otherwise we'll never get to that hermit. It's the only way."

"And what about Ugaidi?" Nala asked, gesturing to the whimpering cub in front of them. He was hyperventilating on the ground, back to being a distraught wreck. "He's not going to survive out there in the desert! He's not built for the heat!"

"We could use Zazu's dead corpse as a heat shield?" Haiba suggested with a smile. "That is, if you're up for killing him."

"We're not killing anyone," Nala decided. "Let's just get this journey over and done with. Maybe then we can have our proper home back."

"Fine," Simba said. "We leave at sundown. It'll be much colder in the desert when it's night. Better time to travel."

"Hi, kids." Sarafina stepped into the resort, looking somewhat confused. As if she was struggling to remember something that had happened to her. Simba and the others didn't notice, though. "What's going on?"

"We're going on a journey," Nala told her. "Right across the jungle to find some hermit. We think he might be able to help us with bringing the Pride Lands back."

"You'd need very powerful magic to do that," Sarafina said. "The power of a *god*." Her eyes seemed to glow a luminescent green as she said that...

But Simba and his friends didn't notice. "It's worth a try," he said. "Besides, we don't have anything else to do."

"As long as you're safe," Sarafina said. "Do you want me to come along?" As the oldest of the group, she felt it was her duty to ensure that they were all safe. It was as though she was the mother of them all now.

"Well, Haiba says that you shouldn't," Nala told her. "He thinks that you're going to form some kind of bond with Zazu and get married or something."

Sarafina glanced at Zazu. He still lay on the ground, unconscious from crashing into the tree earlier. "Hmm... well, he *is* sortof cute..."

"Mom!"

"I'm kidding," Sarafina laughed. "I don't do interspecies relationships." Haiba looked up at her hopefully. "Or relationships with *cubs*," she added, glaring at him. "Even if they are sweet."

"Damn it," Haiba cursed under his breath.

"Oh, well," Sarafina said. "I suppose I'll just stay here and look after Zazu. Make sure he doesn't hurt himself again."

"You do that," Nala said. "We'll just... be going, then. Bye!" She padded off with Simba and Haiba. "You coming, Ugaidi?"

Ugaidi jumped onto Nala's back, clutching her tightly. "Creatures! Don't leave me alone! They can't eat me! They can't!"

"That's what I thought," Nala said, smiling as she followed after her friends.

"Be safe!" Sarafina called after them as they left the resort. "I'll see you soon!"

Once they were out of sight, Sarafina sat herself down by the edge of the river. She sighed, feeling relaxed once more.

It wasn't long before the voice sounded again.

"*Sarafina...*"

Her eyes began to glow a bright green again, and she seemed to go into a trance. "*Sarafina... you know what your purpose is.*"

"I know... what my purpose is," Sarafina said, in a dull tone.

"*You know what you have to do,*" Hago told her, invading her mind. "*And you will finish the job—soon.*"

"Soon," Sarafina agreed, completely obedient to her mate. "Very soon..."

Suddenly, Hago's influence seemed to cease, and Sarafina's eyes returned to their normal colour. She blinked several times, as if her memory had suddenly gone blank for a few seconds. *That was odd*, she thought, putting a paw to her forehead. *It felt like I was somewhere else for a moment.*

Unaware of what had happened to her, she rested herself on her stomach, and closed her eyes. *Time for a nap, I think...*

AN: Hmm... lots of interesting things happening in these two chapters. They probably don't make much sense right now, but they will in time. I'm just going to leave you in suspense there... Until next time, dear readers! Don't forget to write those words of encouragement in those little blocks of text you call reviews.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: The Desert

AN: I bet you're loving these quick updates, aren't you? But I think this story has been the most enjoyable to write yet. I quite like these next two chapters, as they involve that sandy place called the desert. It's so filled with fun things to do, isn't it? All that... sand. Thoroughly entertaining.

DrKill8000: I think you'll find this is the last series *any* of the characters are in. I'm leaving, remember? Hago is definitely up to something, but I'm not gonna tell you just yet. You'll find out later on in the series...

anonymous13: I suppose I am getting a bit nostalgic about my first few stories. Series One feels like such a long time ago. Zazu is also my favourite non-lion in the series. I don't like Rafiki much, so I'm not really sure whether he will ever appear in the series. You're right about Hago appearing in every series, too. He is the longest running antagonist—I can't stop myself from bringing him back! Did you really start reading from my first story? I thought I'd since lost *all* of my readers who started right at the beginning. If so, then congratulations! You're the most dedicated reader!

Chapter Three: The Desert

"Well, there it is," Haiba said, shielding his eyes from the glaring sun. "Any takers?"

"I'm not going in there," Nala said. "We'll be fried."

Simba, Nala, Haiba and Ugaiddi were gathered right at the edge of the desert, shielded from the intense heat by the various tall trees that were commonplace in the jungle. Some of the sand had flooded right into the area, leaving them covered in it right up to their legs. Even from here they could feel the heat. It was making them sweat just thinking about it. The thought of walking *across* this sandy plain sounded crazy...

"The creatures!" Ugaiddi whimpered, legs shaking. "They're in the sand! Waiting! Ready to eat us all!"

"Shut up, Ugaiddi," Haiba said. "There aren't any monsters in the sand. Now, can we just decide on how the heck we're going to cross this thing?"

"The sun is setting," Simba noticed, watching the bright ball of flame in the sky descend over the horizon. "Once it gets dark, it won't be so hot. That way we should be able to make our way across."

A gust of wind suddenly blew the sand up in their faces, causing them to cough and splutter. "Ugh!" Nala cried, sputtering sand from her mouth. "How can it be so windy and hot at the same time?"

"It's hot wind, that's for sure," Haiba said, fanning himself with a paw. He narrowed his eyes as the wind kicked up more sand around the desert. "Hmm... looks like there's a sandstorm on the way."

"Oh, that's just great!" Simba groaned, slapping himself on the forehead. "As if the desert on its own wasn't bad enough!"

"I hate sandstorms," Nala complained. "They're really... sandy."

"Well, *duh*!" Haiba exclaimed. "What did you expect? They're not gonna be banana-y, are they?"

"Shut your mouth, Haiba," Nala snapped. "You're not helping."

"*You're* not helping by stating the obvious," Haiba retorted. "Look, I say that we should move now before the sandstorm gets any worse."

"I still think we should wait until later," Simba said, looking rather hesitant to step out onto the desert. "The sandstorm might get better over time."

"But look," Haiba said, pointing into the desert with a claw. "The wind's only picking up the sand every so often. If we move quickly, then we might be able to get through to the other side by the time the moon comes up."

"Fine." Nala gave in, striding out from the edge and walking straight through the desert. "Let's just get this over and done with."

"Hey, wait up!" Simba called, bounding after her. "Come on, you guys!"

"Creatures!" Ugaiddi said, walking briskly around in circles. "Coming for me! *For me!*"

"Ugaidi, for the nine trillionth time, there *are no creatures*," Haiba stressed, just about having had enough of this insane cub. Couldn't he get it through his thick skull that he wasn't in any danger at all? "Why can't you just understand that?"

"You're p-p-probably o-one of them!" Ugaidi stammered, thrusting a claw into his chest. "You're out to get me, too! You're all after me!" He screamed in terror, before sprinting off into the desert.

Another gust of wind blew more sand into Haiba's face. "You're a crazy coot!" Haiba yelled through coughs. "That's the last time I ever bring an insane cub on a journey!"

"It's... so... hot..." Simba panted, his tongue lolling out like a dog. "Maybe we *should* have waited until it got dark..." For once in his life, he hated the fact that he was covered in fur. It just seemed to make everything feel even hotter...

"Where's Haiba?" Nala asked, jerking her head in a backwards direction. She couldn't see him anywhere. He seemed to be obscured completely by the sand that was being blown up into the air by the wind, which seemed to be getting worse. "I think this sandstorm is going to be a bigger problem than we thought..."

"What do you—?" Simba was interrupted by more sand being thrust into his face. "*Puh!* This stuff tastes awful!" As he wiped the sand from his face, a worried expression soon began to form on it. "Maybe we should turn back..."

"Too late for that now," Nala said, frowning. The wind was getting worse. She ducked her head low to avoid being hit by more sand. "We're trapped."

"Maybe we can find somewhere to— *Wah!*" Simba cried out as Ugaidi collided with him, knocking them both into a sandpit. "Ugaidi! What the heck are you doing?"

"The creatures!" Ugaidi screamed. "They're the wind! The air! Everything and everyone! Come for us all!"

"Could you be any more insane?" Simba yelled at him, pushing the cub away. "I'm beginning to regret bringing him along!"

"We must hide!" Ugaidi declared, sticking his head deep into the sand.

"We've got enough problems without you freaking out over these non-existent creatures!" Simba retorted, shielding his eyes as another gust of wind attacked him. He looked around for Nala, but the wall of sand in front of him was preventing any sort of decent visibility. "*We need to find somewhere to hide!*" He shouted this as loud as he could, hoping that Nala would hear him.

But he was alone. All alone.

Another blast of sand struck him right from below, sending Simba flying right onto his back. His eyes were beginning to water, his vision turning blurry. The sand was everywhere. His eyes, his ears, between his toes. Everywhere.

And now it was confusing him. Whether it was the sand itself or something like heat stroke, his mind was swimming. He felt like the sand was sucking him in. Swallowing him up. It was going to eat him whole, and no one would see him ever again...

Simba closed his eyes as the sand began to collect in his mouth. He was going to die here. Just like his parents. This sandstorm was going to bury him. No matter how hard Nala or anyone else looked, they would never find him in this endless desert...

"Simba!"

Through half-closed eyes, in the haze he could see Nala's face looking down on him. Wrenching him out of the sand that was threatening to drag him under. Slowly, his mind began to clear. Things seemed to fall back into perspective. "Nala?"

"Come on!" Nala was yelling at him, pulling him to his paws. "This sandstorm is messing with our heads!"

Simba nodded, coughing up sand onto the ground. He kept his eyes focused on what was below, rubbing them with his paws to get the sand out. "What... what happened?" he asked groggily, still feeling rather confused.

"Never mind that," Nala said, pulling him away. "Come on!" The two ran off, deeper and deeper into the desert. The sand was being kicked up all around them, as if the desert was continuing to try and bring them both down.

"We never should have come here!" Simba said. "I *knew* we should have waited until it was night!"

Nala squinted through the mass of sand, looking up ahead. "Look! I think I see something!" She sprinted towards the thing in the distance, and smiled when she realised what it was. "A tree!"

It was a tree, all right—albeit a dead one. There were no leaves—just a few dead branches. But its trunk had come significantly loose, leaving it hanging at an angle over the ground. It provided more than enough shelter for two cubs.

"Come on!" Nala dived underneath the tree. Simba soon followed. At last, they were safe from the sandstorm. "That was close. *Too* close." She looked to Simba, who was still in the process of coughing up more sand. "You okay?"

"No," Simba spluttered. "I feel awful." He rubbed his eyes. They were bloodshot thanks to the copious amount of sand that had gotten inside. "Remind me never to enter this desert ever again."

Nala looked around, trying to see through the vortex of sand. She could just about see the purpling sky above. "It's getting dark," Nala said. "The wind might not be as bad once the moon's up."

"Can you see where we were?" Simba asked, joining her search for anything other than a million billion grains of sand.

"Nope," Nala concluded, before letting out a sigh. "Like I said: it's too late to turn back now. We might as well carry on until we reach the other side of the desert."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going out there now," Simba said. "Wow, that storm really messed with my head. I didn't know what I was thinking."

"You don't think there are monsters... in the sand, do you?" Nala asked, cautiously lifting up a paw from the sandy ground. "Maybe Ugaidi was right about there being more creatures..."

"No. I don't think so," Simba said, shaking his head. He then frowned. "I don't think we'll be seeing either him or Haiba for a while, either."

"But they can't be dead," Nala said quickly, not wanting to believe such an awful thing. "*Can* they?"

"I don't know," Simba said, looking just as worried as she was. "They could have been lost to the sand, too..."

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: The Long Walk

Chapter Four: The Long Walk

Haiba seriously doubted whether he would ever see Simba or Nala again. Seeing the ferocity of the sandstorm before him, he knew that anyone who dared to enter would surely die. They would never make it across in time before the sand ravaged their innards...

And it was all his fault.

He sighed, frowning. It was him who had suggested that they try and brave the storm. Of course, at that point, it hadn't seemed quite so serious. He thought that they might be able to make it, if they were careful. And now Simba, Nala, and Ugaidi—as annoying as he was—were all dead.

Haiba took a step back from the furious storm, feeling a stabbing pain in his chest that he was sure was something called heartbreak. His friends were dead, and he was the cause of it all. All because he couldn't be patient enough to wait until sundown. What would the Great Kings of the Past think of him now? They would never let him kiss one of them!

Sighing, Haiba turned away from the desert, facing the jungle that he knew now he would be trapped in for ever. As the sadness crept into his body, he also knew that he would have to return to Sarafina and Zazu and tell them what had happened. It would be just the three of them now. And he had to look after them. That was what Simba and Nala would want. He would have to restore the Pride Lands all by himself. That was his job now.

He began to walk away, head hung low, back towards the jungle.

"Haiba!"

He turned around at the sound of the voice. It sounded distant—almost like it was millions of miles away—but he could still hear it. "What was that?" he wondered aloud. "It sounded like..." Realisation descended upon him. "It sounded like Simba."

"Haiba!" Yes, it was definitely Simba's voice.

Ah, Simba... Haiba thought, as some happiness returned to his body. That golden fur and cute tuft just makes me tingle all over... He mentally slapped himself. No time for swooning over your crushes, Haiba. You have to rescue them instead!

As Haiba turned back towards the desert, he saw that the fierce wind was starting to quell into a light breeze. The sand that was being blown up into the air was now gently floating towards the ground.

It was at this point that he realised the sandstorm was over, and in the time it took to blink, he was already running off into the desert to rescue his friends.

"Haiba!" Simba screamed again, desperate for him to hear his cries. He hoped that Haiba hadn't been dragged down by the sandstorm. He didn't know how he would cope with yet *another* death of a loved one...

"Simba, look," Nala said, gesturing to the desert. "I think the sandstorm has stopped."

The two cubs both watched as the sand fluttered gently back into place, no longer swirling insanely around in the air. All that remained was the purplish glow of the sky. The last of the dying sunlight was filtering away into night. It seemed that Simba's original theory about the desert being safe at this time was indeed correct. They should have waited, after all.

"The moon will be coming up soon," Simba realised. "We should get moving—before the wind decides to pick up again."

"Yeah," Nala agreed, getting up carefully so she wouldn't bump her head on the decaying tree that overshadowed them both. "You're right."

"But what about Haiba?" Simba suddenly asked. "Shouldn't we try and look for him? Ugaidi, too. He just disappeared after crashing right into me."

"Simba, the desert is a really big place," Nala told him, in a tone that said she wasn't prepared to take any chances with this sandy void. "I don't think there's any chance of finding them way out here. It's either keep moving forwards or die out here. Alone in the sand."

Nala took a few steps forward, looking around. "I can't see any water," she sighed, suddenly feeling rather thirsty. "It's a shame. When Haiba and I were looking for you during that whole mermaid business, we were right next to the sea. It must be on the other end of the desert, though..."

"The world is a confusing place," Simba said miserably. "I hate it. Everything seems to go wrong for us."

"That's just the way things happen, Simba," Nala said. "It's not like someone is controlling when and where we go." She walked off, sure that she was heading in the right direction now.

"Yeah," Simba laughed, following her. "That's like saying that there's some guy out there who makes up all those villains we have to fight. What a dumb idea..."

Haiba ran as fast as he could into the desert, as the moon slowly began to rise over his head, providing the only source of illumination in the seemingly neverending place. "Simba! Nala! You around here?" he called, but got no answer.

"Come on—where are you guys?"

He stopped, circling around in order to get a full view of the area. He had been walking for at least half an hour straight now, and there was still no sign of them. He was beginning to get quite worried. Had they been killed in the sandstorm? All it took was for them to swallow some of the sand and suffocate to death. He knew that it happened more than often in sandstorms. Animals went in, and sometimes they never came out...

"Simba! Nala! Anybody!" Haiba cried, walking further into the empty space. He sighed. "I'm not getting anywhere... This is hopeless!"

Suddenly, something caught his attention. Turning his head to the left, he noticed a tree which—Haiba presumed—looked as though it had been dead for at least five hundred years. But if there was any sort of shelter from the deadly sandstorm, then it was there. He hoped that Simba and Nala had seen sense and decided to hide under its trunk. Then they would surely be safe.

Haiba walked over to the tree, sniffing the area surrounding it. Thanks to his heightened Grand Lands sense of smell, he could easily detect Simba and Nala's scent. They had been here. He was sure of it.

"Aha!" Haiba exclaimed, and he ran off in the direction that he was sure Simba and Nala were heading in. "I've got you now!"

"I think I spot something up ahead," Nala said. "Looks like trees."

"Trees?" Simba looked on hopefully, as several tall structures came into view opposite them. "You're right. They're trees!"

"Then that means we made it!" Nala said happily. "We made it through the desert! Without any danger whatsoever!"

"Aside from the horrible sandstorm that almost killed us, yeah," Simba retorted, not fond of thinking about how he had almost suffocated to death. He decided there and then that he despised sand. "Hopefully, that hermit shouldn't be too far away."

"This journey had better be worth it," Nala said. A thought occurred to her. "Oh, no—what if he's dead, Simba?"

"Huh?" He didn't understand.

"Well, the Roho looked like it was thousands of years old," Nala explained. "Who's to say that he wasn't talking about a hermit that died ages ago?"

"I sure *hope* he's not dead," Simba said, as they arrived at the trees. "Otherwise crossing this stupid desert just would have been pointless."

"Guys!" they heard a voice cry in relief.

Simba and Nala turned around to see Haiba hopping towards them. "*Haiba?*" they both exclaimed in surprise.

"That's me," Haiba said, smiling at them. "The one and only. I thought you guys were goners."

"We thought the same of you," Simba said. Then he noticed that Haiba was carrying someone on his back. "Uh, is that Ugaidi?"

"Yep," Haiba said, grabbing the insane cub from his back and patting him gently on the head. "Found the little guy buried up to his head in the sand. I once dated a cub who did that to me once. She left me stuck there for nine hours..."

"At least we're all together," Nala sighed, happy that none of them had died because of the sandstorm. "Now we can find this hermit, ask him about bringing back the Pride Lands and then all go back home where it's safe."

"If we can find the K River," Simba said. "Wherever it is. Think you might be able to help us out, Haiba?"

"*Think?*" Haiba replied. "Simba, I *know* where these things are. Just follow me. I'll get you to the K River in no time at all. They don't call me Mr Really-Good-At-Finding-Places for nothing."

"They don't really call you that, do they?" Nala asked.

"No," Haiba admitted, looking rather embarrassed. "No, they don't."

"All right, let's go," Simba said, entering the other side of the jungle through the trees. "This hermit can't be that much farther away. You never know—we might be back in the Pride Lands by tomorrow morning!"

AN: Those were some tense chapters, weren't they? I bet you thought one of the cubs was going to be killed in the sandstorm. But I wouldn't do that to you. Or *would* I?

Well, that's it from me for now. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow with two more chapters. But only if you say please.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5: The Deadly Chasm

AN: I think I might just get this story finished up by tomorrow. I've really had quite a lot of fun writing it. As you can guess, here are two more chapters.

Haradion: I am going through this series quite quickly. But then that's quite sad when you think about it, seeing as it's my last one.

Greg M 94: Getting smothered by sand is quite a miserable death, isn't it? I wanted to convey that with those two chapters set in the sandstorm.

626and624: Ugaidi has a purpose, as do all of my characters. You won't be seeing it for quite a while, though...

Guest: I'm not really leaving because of a lack of energy—it's just because I think we've finally reached the end of this big story. I could keep this going for series after series if I wanted to.

Chapter Five: The Deadly Chasm

Simba, Nala and Haiba were happier than ever to have the desert behind them. After that horrific sandstorm, they were sure that no worse trouble could befall them while they were on the rest of their journey. Now it should just be a simple, easy stroll to find the hermit—shouldn't it?

"I'm tired," Simba sighed. The weight of exhaustion upon him was a heavy load to bear. After almost being killed by the vicious nature of the sand, he felt ready to collapse and fall unconscious for a week. "This hermit had better not be too far up ahead."

"I don't think so," Haiba said. "That desert was probably the most we had to worry about. The worst is behind us now."

"The trees are much bigger around here," Nala said, looking around the area. It was true. The trees were in fact much wider and taller than those around the other side of the jungle.

"It must be less inhabited," Haiba concluded, staring up at the enormous trees. They seemed to be going up right past the clouds... "It *looks* a lot wilder, too. Hey—maybe we should leave Ugaidi here. That way he won't be able to bother anyone."

"Be nice to the guy," Nala replied. "He's been through a lot. I know he can't tell us *what* he's been through, but the point still stands. It's our job to look after him and nurse him back to health."

"I think we have more important things to concentrate on," Haiba said. "Like kissing, for one thing."

"Haiba, we've been through this a thousand times," Nala said. "You *can't* kiss us. It's not right. Find another girlfriend to have fun with."

"I don't want another girlfriend," Haiba said. "You and Simba are the most beautiful animals I've ever seen!"

"I thought my *mother* was the most beautiful animal you've ever seen," Nala shot back over her shoulder.

"Well, her too," Haiba said. "But it's the younger ones who like to experiment more."

"I'm not even going to ask what that means," Nala said. "Now, shut up or do something useful. We almost got killed last time thanks to your brilliant idea of trying to brave that sandstorm."

"I'll admit that it was a pretty dumb idea," Haiba said, "but you can't change the past. That's a lesson I think *all* of us need to learn."

"I wouldn't want to change the past," Simba said. "Everything happens for a reason, doesn't it?"

"That's odd," Haiba said. "I thought you would have wanted to avoid the destruction of the Pride Lands. Or the death of your parents."

"Yeah," Nala said. "I'm surprised you didn't ask the Roho to bring them back."

"There's a good reason for it," Simba told them, much to their surprise. "The Vimelea took away their souls. They just... wouldn't be the same anymore. I never wanted them to die, but that's the way things go sometimes. Bringing someone

back to life feels utterly pointless to me. I've learned that now."

"But bringing a location back is a completely different matter, I presume?" Haiba guessed.

"Yep," Simba said. "It's not a living thing, is it? And besides, living in that jungle just isn't right for us. Our home is our home—no one should be able to take it away from us or change it."

"Like Aibu?" Nala said. "We took *his* home."

"No, we didn't," Simba said. "The Scavengers killed everyone there—we didn't even know if he was still in the area."

"That doesn't sound right to me," Nala said.

"Look, Nala, it's kill or be killed," Simba snapped, turning around to face her. "Your mother said it herself. We need to do everything we can to survive out here. Get that through your head and we'll survive this." He turned around and kept on walking, looking noticeably angrier than before.

"He's still feeling it," Haiba whispered in Nala's ear. "The grief. Even if he doesn't want to show it."

"He still misses them," Nala said. "His parents. Somehow, I don't know if he'll *ever* be the same again."

"Hopefully this hermit business might cheer him up," Haiba said. "If the Roho didn't lie to us about him being helpful, that is." He looked up ahead. "Hey, look."

"What?" Nala asked, following his gaze.

"Simba's stopped," Haiba said, pointing him out in the distance.

Simba had indeed stopped. When Nala and Haiba caught up to him, it didn't take them long to figure out why.

"Looks like the worst isn't behind us," Simba remarked.

They were staring at one of the longest chasms they had ever seen in their lives. If anyone fell in, then it was a certainty that they would be swept away by the murky river below. Its waves were thrashing around frantically, no thanks to the cascading waterfall pouring out from the opening of a tall cliff at one end. The only way across was through an incredibly large overturned tree trunk that had become wedged between both sides of the gap.

"What do we do?" Nala asked, looking to Simba for help. Being the leader, she trusted him to make the most important decisions. "I've never seen such a big gap before."

Simba waved a paw in the direction of the humongous overturned tree. "We'll have to cross using that," he decided quickly. It wasn't like they were going to turn back now, after how far they'd come already. He wasn't going to rest until they reached that hermit...

"I am *not* stepping on that thing," Haiba declared, backing away from it. "Especially with Mr Insano on my back." He gestured to Ugaidi, who was sprawled over Haiba's back, still unconscious.

"We have to," Simba said, determined. "It's either that or swim across." He glanced down at the deadly waves of the river, hundreds of feet below. "Somehow, I don't think you'd like that option."

Haiba rolled his eyes. "Fine," he grumbled. "We'll take the stupid tree."

The three of them began to step nimbly onto the huge tree all at once, hoping that it would take their combined weight. From what they could tell, this tree trunk felt quite hollow on the inside. It might not take much effort to dislodge it—and then they would find themselves tumbling into the unknown depths below...

"Everyone okay?" Simba asked. Nala and Haiba both nodded. "Then let's keep moving."

They did so, stepping carefully but swiftly across the trunk of the tree. As they began to near the middle of it, they started to relax. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all. Now it seemed quite silly to think that this trunk could collapse at any moment. It was easily holding their weight and—

Crack!

Nala's head snapped upwards. "What was that?" she asked, her expression immediately showing concern.

Simba looked down. He lifted up one of his forepaws to reveal a large crack that had formed right in the middle of the trunk. "I think this tree is older than we thought," he said worriedly. "It's snapping right in half."

The realisation sank in for Haiba. "Oh, no."

Simba's eyes locked onto the safety of the other side of the yawning gap. "Quick—we need to get to the other side." Nala and Haiba both seemed paralysed with fear. "*Now!*"

His loud yelling soon got their attention, and they all found themselves running full pelt for the other side of the chasm, as more and more cracks began to form around the tree trunk. Haiba wrenched Ugaidi from his back and threw him high into the air, where he landed safely on the patch of land at the end of the makeshift bridge. Simba and Nala both jumped at the same time, rolling onto the safety of the grass just in time.

Haiba, however, wasn't so lucky. With a deafening cracking sound, the titanic tree trunk split in half. He screamed as he slipped down the remaining half, unable to reach the safety of the other side in time.

"Haiba!" Nala screamed, but it was too late.

There was nothing they could do.

The two halves of the tree began to spiral down into the water below. Haiba jumped from the edge of the half he was stood on, forepaws flailing around in order to grab hold of anything that might prevent his descent.

Luckily, there were some thin vines dangling from the edge of the cliff where Simba and Nala were stood. He grabbed hold of one with a single paw, dangling right from the edge. He swung from side to side, relieved that he had come this far without gravely injuring himself.

"Haiba!" Simba cried, his head popping out over the edge of the cliff. "Are you okay?"

"Well..." Haiba looked up at his forelegs, and noticed they were littered with bloody scrapes from sliding down the rough surface of the tree trunk. "No."

"Here—we'll help you up." Simba began to tug on the other end of the vine, pulling with all his might in an attempt to help Haiba up. "Just hang on. Nala, help me out here."

Haiba struggled and strained as he tried to keep his grip. He was slowly raised by the joint effort of Simba and Nala, grunting as he reached out with his other forepaw for the edge of the cliff.

Snap! He leapt for the edge just as the vine was tugged loose from the cliff wall, being sucked into the water below. The upper half of his body dangled over the grass, as he tried to haul himself finally to safety. Simba and Nala helped him up.

"You all right?" Nala asked, as Haiba dusted himself down.

He just stared at them. "This journey had *better* be worth it."

Chapter 6: Chapter 6: The Curse

Chapter Six: The Curse

Nala decided that she had better carry Ugaidi for the duration of their adventure. Seeing the bleeding cuts and scrapes on Haiba's body, she doubted whether he would be able to walk by *himself*, let alone carrying an insane cub on his back, too.

"That was it," Haiba said, prompting confused looks from Simba and Nala.

"That was what?" Nala asked.

"The K River," Haiba told them. "Or at least it was connected to it in some way. We *must* be close now."

"Good," Simba said. "I think we've had more than enough trouble for one day—don't you?"

"Definitely," Haiba said. He then grimaced. "Ooh—these cuts are stingy."

"You're bleeding quite bad," Nala noticed, watching the blood stream down his legs and onto the grass below, matting some of it a grisly red colour. "You sure you don't want to take a rest?"

"No, no," Haiba replied, shaking his head. "We're nearly there, so let's just get this over and done with. There'll be plenty of time to rest when we're talking to the hermit."

They finally arrived at a clearing, which opened out onto a massive rocky cliff overlooking an enormous, sparkling river. The moonlight had quite a beautiful effect on it. There seemed to be no other land in sight—the river looked like it went on for ever.

"Wow," Nala gasped, amazed by the sight. "I don't think I've ever seen something so beautiful."

"I dated the moon once," Haiba said, causing Simba and Nala to stare at him. "End of story."

Simba turned his head to the side, and his eyes lit up as he noticed something. "Hey—look! What's that over there?"

On one of the cliff's long protruding edges, a small fire could be seen, flickering quietly in the distance. The three cubs could make out the darkened silhouette of someone sitting right next to it. Whoever it was, they seemed completely featureless from this angle. They couldn't even tell what species they belonged to.

"Do you think it's the hermit?" Nala asked, looking at Simba.

"Must be," Haiba said, stepping beside them. "No one else would be reclusive enough to move all the way out here."

"Looks like we'll have to meet him, then," Simba decided, straightening himself up. "This is it, guys. Try not to make fools of yourselves."

"Oh, don't worry—I'm sure you'll do that on your own," Haiba countered, glaring at him.

Ignoring him, Simba continued on in the direction of the fire, knowing that Nala and Haiba would be right behind him. As he got closer to the fire, and the figure became clearer, he realised that this hermit wasn't a lion of any sort.

He was a golden eagle. And a very large one, too—he easily towered over the three cubs. Although he didn't quite seem to have noticed them yet. The only thing he seemed to be doing was staring intently at the flames, eyes glowing with a similar orangey colour.

The three cubs looked at each other bemusedly, unsure what to make of the eagle. But it was Simba who finally took the initiative and approached him. "Uh... hello. Are you the Hermit of Hekima?"

"What's it to you?" the golden eagle snapped, in a rather rude tone. His gaze, however, never faltered to leave the flames.

"Well, we were told that you might be able to help us," Simba said. He held out a paw for him to shake. "The name's Simba. Prince— I mean, *King* of the Pride Lands."

"How very arrogant," said the Hermit of Hekima.

"Huh?" Simba didn't understand. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"You purport yourself to be the King of the Pride Lands," said the hermit, not even bothering to look at him, "even though I know that kingdom to have been dead for quite some time now."

"The law states that I'm the King," Simba explained, "even though the kingdom is dead. There's only five of us left in the pride now."

"Six," the hermit corrected him.

"What?"

"You do not wish to acknowledge this warped cub to be part of your pride," the hermit said, gesturing to Ugaidi with a wing. "Because you see him as abnormal. Unusual. You disrespect his intelligence. I feel sorry for him."

Simba was already beginning to lose his patience with this hermit. Had the Roho made them come all this way just to be criticised for the way he acted? *What gives?* he thought. *This hermit isn't supposed to teach me lessons—he's supposed to follow orders!*

"I know what you're thinking," the golden eagle told him, "and I won't be following your orders."

Simba's face fell. How did he know what he was thinking? That just wasn't possible! No one could read minds!

"I can read your mind," the Hermit of Hekima told him. "I feel all forms of life. Their feelings, their hopes, their dreams. Everything. It is a curse—but a very useful one at that. I was born with the gift."

"Sure..." Simba said, narrowing his eyes as if he were looking at some insane psycho. "Whatever you say, Creepy Eagle Guy."

"You disrespect me," said the Hermit of Hekima. "I will admit that I feel quite the same way about you, young cub. You still have much to learn."

"Hey, I'm not sure if you know who I am, but—"

The Hermit of Hekima chuckled. "Ha. Even more arrogance—yet it seems to be something that you hate. Very hypocritical, Simba." He noticed his surprised reaction. "Yes, I know who you are. You may have done many great things—your defeat of Death was most impressive—but you still need to work on your personality."

"I ain't changing," Simba declared. "We came all this way to find your help."

"Well, I can't offer any help," said the Hermit of Hekima. "I don't particularly *want* to, either. You're not worthy of it."

"Now *you're* just being arrogant," Simba countered.

"No," the eagle said. "You really *aren't* worthy of my help. As I said before: you still have much to learn."

"Then just what are you doing around here?" Haiba asked, stepping beside Simba. "If I'm honest, staring at a fire doesn't seem like the most interesting way to spend your night."

"I must meditate every night by these flames," the Hermit of Hekima told them. "It helps me to become one with the earth and all of its inhabitants." A smile formed on his beak. "I see that you have the same gift."

"Yes—I have experience with all life forms," Haiba said. "That date with the tree was particularly exciting."

"You're praising *Haiba* and not *me*?" Simba asked, offended. "You really are something, you know that?"

"You are quite rude," the Hermit of Hekima said. "But if it will stop you from disturbing my meditation, then what is it that you wish for?"

"Do you have the power to bring the Pride Lands back?" Simba asked, getting straight to the point. "You see, the Roho told us that it was protected by a magical spell and—"

"The Roho?" The golden eagle's eyes seemed to widen. "Of course. You have very powerful allies. I do not know how to bring the Pride Lands back—and even if I *did* I wouldn't help you. I was not aware of any magical spell protecting the area. It must be very powerful magic indeed to evade my powers."

"Can't you do *anything*?" Simba groaned. "It's just that we've kinda come a really long way and—"

"If you're going to continue on insisting," the Hermit of Hekima interrupted, "then I can always predict your future."

"Ooh!" Simba's eyes lit up, excited. "Go on, then!"

"Very well." He closed his eyes. "Oh... Mmm... Ah... Before the moon rises three times—"

"Yes?"

"—you're gonna die," he finished.

Simba grinned. "Ooh, I'm gonna— *What?*" He jumped back in surprise, eyes wide in shock.

The Hermit of Hekima stared at him, eyes equally wide. "*You are going to die.*"

"I don't believe it," Haiba said, horrified. "You never told me you were going to die, Simba."

"Well, I didn't know!" Simba shot back, before staring angrily at the Hermit of Hekima. "How could you do this to me?"

"It was foretold," said the hermit, "that I would curse you."

"*You* cursed me?" Simba exclaimed.

The hermit nodded. "Yes," he said. "Unless you can redeem yourself before the moon rises three times, then you will suffer a fate worse than death. Some might even say a fate worse than that."

"A fate *worse* than a fate worse than death?" Haiba said in confusion.

The Hermit of Hekima nodded. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I grow weary from my work and must rest." He closed his eyes once more, and seemed to go into a deep trance.

"Oh, come on!" Simba moaned, yelling at the hermit. "Hello? Hello? *Hello!*"

But the Hermit of Hekima didn't respond. What he said was what he said.

Simba was going to die in three days.

AN: The Hermit of Hekima is quite an interesting character, is he not? But then he has put a curse on Simba, so you all probably hate him now. But he is right—Simba does need to change his ways. He's getting a bit arrogant, and we don't want him to go down a dark path like Aibu, do we?

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: The Lesson

AN: Well, what do you know? An update every day. That means we're finally at the end of this story. Hope you enjoy it!

kora22: Simba can be quite disrespectful at times. It's something he needs to change.

Greg M 94: This story was made to be quite a suspenseful one, so it looks like I've done my job! I wouldn't exactly call the Hermit of Hekima a "secluded feathery menace", though. He can be quite useful...

anonymous13: At least this curse isn't bringing Simba pain like the Kulaani illness did in *Sick Simba*. That story was just agonising...

Chapter Seven: The Lesson

It was three days later.

"Simba, are you still in there?" Nala grumbled, staring at Haiba with a bewildered expression on her face. She couldn't believe the way he had reacted to this curse that the Hermit of Hekima had placed upon him. It was so silly, so ridiculous that she just wanted to grab him by the head and shake him until he saw sense.

"I'm not coming out," replied the voice from inside the cave. It was sealed off with several large stones, preventing anyone from getting in.

"This is just getting stupid," Nala said, looking around the quiet area of the jungle they were in. It was where Simba had decided to run off to in a panic after the Hermit of Hekima had placed the curse on him. She and Haiba were stood on either side of the cave, looking noticeably bored. "Haiba, think you can get him out of there?"

Haiba rolled his eyes and put his mouth right up to the blocked cave entrance. "Simba, you've been in there for three whole days. What are you doing?"

"Waiting," Simba answered, his voice echoing around the interior of the cave. "It's obvious that I'm still in good health, so an illness isn't going to kill me. I know *exactly* how that eagle plans on getting rid of me: an accident. Something so horrible that I'll be lying in a pile of my dismembered legs. And blood, too. Lots and *lots* of blood."

"Maybe he was just... kidding?" Haiba suggested, shrugging his shoulders. Nala nodded eagerly at him, wanting him to continue with that idea. "Yeah—he was just toying with you, Simba. It was a... a... uh... a test. Yep. That's right. I bet it was just a test to see whether you were worthy or not."

"No way," Simba said. "I'm not coming out of here. Not until the moon has risen three times. Only then will I know that he was lying."

"Oh, come on, Simba," Nala said. "I want to go back home. I can imagine what my mother will be thinking... She must be worried sick!"

"Well, then, you should have warned her that a spooky hermit eagle would put a curse on me and that our journey would take a lot longer as a result," Simba retorted quickly. "Be prepared for anything."

"I have to admit that this whole journey seemed like a gigantic waste of time," said Haiba, frowning. "All that walking—all these cuts on my body—and for what? An evil curse from a stupid hermit."

"He didn't look stupid," Nala said. "Or evil, for that matter."

"What good animal would put a curse on Simba?" Haiba asked, gesturing to him inside the cave. "Sure, he's been a little rough around the edges since the Pride Lands were destroyed, but that's life. He'll grow out of it."

"I don't think it's quite that simple," Nala said, pushing her nose up to the cave entrance. "Simba, come on! We've already got enough trouble to deal with without you acting like a big scaredy cat! Ugaidi's been unconscious for three days, you know! I think he might be dead!"

"He's still alive," Haiba said, pointing at Ugaidi, who was lying a few feet away from them on the ground. "He's breathing, see?"

"Yeah, but it's that kind of dead where you're still... alive," Nala said, realising at the end that she had just said something very dumb.

"You mean a coma?" Haiba asked. "Somehow, I don't think so. All that torture by the creatures must have severely disrupted his sleep patterns..."

"Tell me when the moon comes up, and then I'll come out," Simba said.

Haiba suddenly had a brainstorm. "Hey! The moon's come up, Simba! You can come out now!"

"Nice try," Simba said. "I can still see sunlight coming in through the holes in the cave wall. You heard what I said—just wait and everything will be fine."

"But it's so boring!" Haiba complained. "I've been sitting here for three days now without anything to hug or kiss! Nala kept catching me when I tried with her!"

"I'm still not coming out."

In a fit of anger, Haiba picked up a rock and hurled it at the cave. Simba gasped from the inside. "What was that apocalyptic clonk?"

Haiba smiled slyly. "I didn't see anything," he lied. "Relax, Simba—we're on guard, remember?"

Nala sighed. "This is hopeless. We can't do anything."

"Well..." Haiba grinned at her. "I just might have a plan."

Simba sat inside the darkness of the cave, shaking with fear. That darn Hermit of Hekima—this was all his fault! After everything that Simba had achieved—all the animals he'd saved—his reward was to be cursed for being arrogant? That was just ridiculous! If he ever saw that eagle again, then he was going to rip off both of his wings!

"I must be hallucinating," Simba said in a panicky voice. "Three days now without food or water." He looked around the bleak cave. "At least I'm safe in here. I've only got to survive until the moon comes up and then I'll be safe."

A sudden crumbling sound filled the cave. Simba let out a scream of terror, backing up against one of the walls. He watched as the ceiling caved in, several rocks and boulders thumping to the ground.

Haiba dropped down in the centre of the cave, followed by Nala. "There we go," Haiba said. "A bit of Grand Lands digging skills can always be useful."

"Get out of here!" Simba yelled, motioning for them to leave. "You know it's not safe if we let the real world inside here!"

"Simba, nothing is coming to get you," Nala said. "It's obvious that eagle was trying to trick you. He probably just wanted to be left alone. I think that's why he came all the way out here to live out his life."

"It's not really fair, either," Haiba said. "I mean, I don't think you're very arrogant. You're perfect, Simba. No problems at all. That Hermit of Hekima is probably just a fraud. A phoney. Probably just some evil guy out to cause trouble. Everyone knows that there are no problems with you whatsoever—"

"*All right!*" Simba yelled, at the top of his voice. "I admit it! I'm arrogant! I'm selfish! I disrespect others! Everything he said was true! It's all true..." Tears began to form in my eyes. "But I just can't help it. Nothing's... nothing's been the same since they died. It's the first time I've ever had to do anything by myself. It's hard." He began to cry, sobbing as his tears spilled onto the ground.

Suddenly, a loud screech was heard from above the cave. Simba, Nala and Haiba could tell who it belonged to.

The three cubs all looked up to see the Hermit of Hekima land gracefully on the roof of the cave, looking down on them with his intelligent eyes.

"Wow." Haiba looked stunned. "That worked better than I expected."

"You have learned your lesson, I presume, Simba?" said the eagle, the traces of a smile on his beak.

"I'm sorry!" he cried, eyes streaming with tears. "But you don't understand! How hard it is to be a leader when you're broken inside! You're probably right—I'm no good at all." He hung his head in shame.

"I never said you were no good, Simba," the Hermit of Hekima told him. "I merely said that you needed to learn to treat others with respect. I understand that there have been... complications since the destruction of the Pride Lands, but if

you're going to lead this pride of yours then you need to learn to keep a cool head on things. Only then will you succeed."

"I get it now," Simba said, still crying softly.

"You need to stay positive, child," the Hermit of Hekima told him. "Otherwise your life will be forever filled with misery. The death of your parents must be dealt with in a tender way without releasing your grief in a rude way to others."

"I understand," said Simba, nodding slowly.

"Very well," said the hermit, straightening himself up. "Then my curse is lifted."

"Thank you," Simba said.

"One more thing," the Hermit of Hekima said. "If you are looking for advice as to what spell might be protecting the Pride Lands, then I suggest that you consult an actual wizard. The magic is too powerful for me to recognise its origin... I will be keeping a close eye on it, however. If you should ever need any help, then I will always be here."

"A way back home would be nice," Haiba spoke up. "We kinda got into a lot of trouble on the way over."

"Oh, you should have taken the underground tunnel just up ahead," said the hermit, indicating the direction with his wing. "It links both sides of the jungle, saving all the trouble of crossing that perilous desert."

Simba, Nala and Haiba stared at him. "You are *kidding*," they all said.

"Goodbye, children." With a brief nod, the Hermit of Hekima spread his wings and took to the skies, spiralling away into the air. Before Simba, Nala and Haiba could blink, he was gone.

"Well," Haiba said. "Back home, then." He picked up Ugaidi from the ground and slung him over his back, starting to walk off in the direction the Hermit of Hekima had told them to go. Simba and Nala trailed right behind him.

"Yep," said Nala. "Time to find a wizard."

"At least we know *something*," Simba said, smiling up at her. "From now on, I'm going to lead you the way I should: *fairly*."

As they walked off into the horizon, the Hermit of Hekima watched them from the top of a nearby tree. He smiled, knowing that what Simba had said was true, and as a result his pride was now much stronger.

And if they all worked together, then they would have a very great future ahead of them.

The End

AN: The Hermit of Hekima isn't such a bad guy after all, is he? Looks like Simba, Nala and Haiba are still pretty clueless as to what's protecting the Pride Lands, though. But if they find a wizard, then maybe that might shed some more light on the situation... If only there was some sort of evil magical lion who the three cubs knew that might have some information...

NEXT TIME: An old enemy starts to infect the dreams of Simba and the others... Can he finally be put to rest?